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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BAKU 001069

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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJANI ISLAMIC STRUCTURE'S LAGGING LEGITIMACY
POSES RISKS

REF: A. BAKU 00096

[B](#). BAKU 00581

[C](#). BAKU 00748

Classified By: Ambassador Anne Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#). (C) Summary: The Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) -- the official GOAJ establishment for administering Islam -- is a legacy from the Czarist and Soviet approach to religion, and is responsible for the education and placement of imams throughout Azerbaijan. The CMB -- and its leader, Sheikh Allahshukur Pashazade -- appear to enjoy little support from religious Azerbaijanis, who view the Sheikh and his fellow CMB imams as corrupt and poorly educated. While Sheikh Pashazade cultivates an image as protector of Azerbaijan's tradition of religious tolerance and works effectively with his counterparts from the Christian and Jewish communities, his rent-seeking activities, such as skimming money from donations at pilgrimage sites, the hajj, and clerical appointments are quickly reducing his credibility with religiously observant Muslims. The CMB's lagging legitimacy is opening up a religious vacuum for alternative sources of religious authority, which could create problems for the GOAJ over the next decade, if radical, external actors fill the void. End Summary.

Caucasus Muslim Board: Historical Inheritance

[2](#). (C) The Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) is a legacy from the Russian Czarist and Soviet approach to Islamic practice in Azerbaijan. Both political systems created religious departments within their respective governments as tools to control Islam. These institutions served as gatekeepers for appointing official clerics, regulating Islamic education, and shaping the overall character of Islamic practice to ensure it supported Moscow. The GOAJ has almost entirely retained this structural approach toward Islam.

[3](#). (C) The structure represented by the CMB increasingly appears outmoded against the slow but steady resurgence of Islamic practice in Azerbaijan. While most Azerbaijanis still have a limited understanding of Islamic theology, a gradual change is occurring, particularly among Azerbaijanis under the age of thirty-five. Azerbaijanis' gradually rising interest in learning more about Islamic theology and practice is a key dynamic that is unraveling the GOAJ's anachronistic approach toward Islam as represented by the CMB.

The Caucasus Muslim Board as Gatekeeper

14. (C) The Baku-based CMB administrative headquarters are located next to the Blue Mosque, although the CMB hopes to move to the grounds of the Teze Pir (New Holy Place) Mosque. (NOTE: The two mosques are the largest Shia mosques in Baku. The Teze Pir takes up an entire block in one of Baku's oldest neighborhoods.) We estimate the CMB has several dozen employees. During a recent visit, clearly armed thuggish-looking young men were congregating in an office near the Sheikh's. While they were likely bodyguards, the open display of weapons detracts from the sense of religiosity of the area. All mosques must receive CMB approval before they can be officially registered with the State Committee on Work with Religious Affairs (SCWRA). (NOTE: The SCWRA was established in 2001. Rafiq Aliyev, the first chairman of the SCWRA, had acrimonious relations with the Sheikh and the CMB. Since the July 2006 appointment of new SCWRA leader Hidayat Orjuvov, however, relations between the two bodies have warmed considerably. Local contacts report the Sheikh and Orujov have reached a modus vivendi on the respective responsibilities for the two institutions, with the Sheikh taking the lead on Islamic issues. Per ref A, Orujov publicly deferred to the Sheikh during a December 2006 lunch hosted by the Ambassador.) The CMB also organizes Azerbaijanis, participation in the hajj and other religious pilgrimages.

15. (C) The CMB is the gatekeeper for controlling official clerics and official mosques. The CMB oversees the education and placement of all state-appointed imams (known locally as akhunds) and other Islamic teachers to mosques and madrassas. The CMB administers the Baku Islamic University and its extension branches, which are the official pathway for

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becoming a cleric (ref B). The CMB also keeps tabs on the contents of Friday sermons in some mosques. According to Islamic scholar Aysel Vazirova, the CMB provides general guidance to akhunds in preparing their sermons. Popular Shia cleric Ilgar Ibrahimoglu also suggested the CMB provides general instructions for akhunds, but it is unclear how closely the CMB monitors compliance with its official advice.

16. (C) Our best judgment is the CMB and the security services keep close tabs on mosques that are suspected of advocating a radical or political message. At least two factors, however, constrain the GOAJ's ability to regulate sermons. First, a wide variety of Baku-based Islamic commentators report that radical Islamic networks increasingly have been pushed underground, complicating the GOAJ's monitoring efforts. Second, the GOAJ's ability to keep tabs on mosques diminishes as one leaves Baku for the regions.

The Sheikh: Inveterate Survivor

17. (C) Sheikh Allahshukur Pashazade -- an ethnic Talysh (Persian) and a professing Shia -- was born in 1949 in a village near the southern city of Lenkaran. The Sheikh received some theological training at the Mir-i Arab Madrasa, subsequently graduating from the Tashkent Islamic University in 1975. He began working at the CMB in 1975, and assumed the CMB chairmanship in 1980.

18. (C) The Sheikh's public image rests on his role as the protector of Azerbaijan's tradition of religious tolerance and the manager of good relations among other religious confessions. The Sheikh appears quite comfortable in this role, and uses his large, well-appointed home to entertain other religious officials, from Azerbaijan and abroad. The Sheikh has warm public relations with the heads of several other religious confessions in Azerbaijan, especially the representatives from the Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, and the local Jewish communities. (The Sheikh and other

religious leaders make a regular point of showing up together at diplomatic functions throughout Baku. President Aliyev privately refers to them as "the Sheikh and his team.") In meetings with the Sheikh, these religious officials show a clear deference to the Sheikh by reiterating his points or acknowledging his role in promoting religious tolerance. Even in private meetings with these religious officials, they often cite the well-rehearsed talking point that the Sheikh has been instrumental in ensuring freedom of religion for their community. The Sheikh also maintains good relations with Islamic officials abroad, usually traveling several times a year to other Islamic countries. Although the Sheikh has cordial relations with the Embassy and U.S.-based religious groups, his public rhetoric over the last year took on a surprisingly anti-American tone following travels to Russia and Iran.

¶9. (C) Even the Sheikh's critics admit the Sheikh is a savvy politician, skilled at crafting a public persona, and an inveterate survivor. The Sheikh's ability to hold onto his position during the transition from the Soviet period through the early years of independence and throughout former President Heydar Aliyev's time in office and into Ilham Aliyev's presidency is a testament to his political survival skills. Local contacts unanimously report that during the Soviet period, the Sheikh was widely believed to be a serving KGB colonel. Contacts argue that the Sheikh's ability to sit atop the CMB for over 25 years -- despite the liability of being perceived as a tool of the Soviet intelligence apparatus -- underscores that the Sheikh is no political lightweight. One of the keys to the Sheikh's ability to survive the transition from the Soviet period to independent Azerbaijan was his public role in galvanizing a public response to "Black January," when Soviet forces stormed Baku and killed approximately 130 Azerbaijani citizens in January 1990.

¶10. (C) In addition to the Sheikh's political instincts and ability to craft a public image, the Sheikh's riches also appear to have reinforced his longevity. As noted below, local contacts report the Sheikh is engaged in a variety of rent-seeking activities, such as skimming money from donations at pilgrimage sites, the hajj, and appointing

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clerics to key positions. While we lack explicit evidence, we believe the Sheikh probably has to pay a portion of this money to the Presidential Administration to maintain his position.

CMB and Sheikh's Moral Authority Limited

¶11. (C) There is strong contrast between the Sheikh's carefully groomed public image and the Sheikh's dwindling popularity among the general population. After meeting with a range of Islamic scholars and practicing believers, our overriding conclusion is that the Sheikh and the CMB have little to no religious or moral authority among the general population, particularly among practicing, educated believers. Local contacts consistently point to two factors that undercut the religious authority of the Sheikh and the CMB: their limited theological knowledge and the Sheikh's rent-seeking behavior.

¶12. (C) Elshad Miri, a former SCWRA employee who has written over a dozen books on Islam and administers a popular website, told us the Sheikh has little moral authority among believers in Azerbaijan. Miri highlighted the Sheikh's widely perceived involvement in using the hajj and the donations collected at pilgrimage sites for his own profit. Kenan Guliyev, a reporter on religious issues for the opposition Yeni Musavat newspaper and a recent IVP participant, highlighted that while the Sheikh is formally a Shia cleric, he has no religious rank within the Shia clerical hierarchy.

¶13. (C) Farda Asadov, a former professor of Islamic history at Baku State University's Oriental Studies Department and the current executive director of the Open Society Institute, drew a contrast between the Sheikh and the other wings of the GOAJ. Asadov argued that whereas the GOAJ has generally been successful in monopolizing the political space, the Sheikh has failed to exert his authority in the religious sphere. Asadov pointed out that only a minority of the akhunds appointed by the CMB are respected by the general population, whereas unofficial Islamic teachers generally have a much higher level of support within their communities. As other commentators have argued, Asadov said the number of unofficial, underground mosques is rising, although it is impossible to quantify this trend.

¶14. (C) Fuad Aliyev, a young Western-educated Azerbaijani who heads a discussion group on Islamic values, estimated that only 30 percent of the official clerics are respected by local believers. While Azerbaijanis lack of respect for akhunds can be explained in part by Soviet period's anti-clerical disposition, Aliyev said the clerics' lack of education is a central reason for their low-standing among the Azeri populace.

¶15. (C) According to a range of contacts, the Sheikh and the CMB make money from several of the official religious activities they administer. Key sources of income for the Sheikh and the CMB include skimming money from donations boxes at mosques and holy places, the hajj (ref C), and funeral rites. In addition to these rent-seeking activities, the Sheikh and his family reportedly have a wide variety of suspect personal business interests. Fuad Aliyev told us that Sheikh has a personal cut of General Motors' business in Baku, granting the Sheikh access to a variety of imports coming from Dubai. Many other contacts report that the Sheikh or his family members have shady business interests in the construction and lumber sectors, as well as the sale of fruit and vegetables in southern Azerbaijan.

Why is the Sheikh still around?

¶16. (C) Given the legitimacy problems surrounding the Sheikh and the CMB, we asked local contacts why the GOAJ has not fired the Sheikh or sought to clean up the CMB's image. Most argued that the GOAJ lacks a long-term strategy to deal with the consequences of this legitimacy problem. Nariman Gasimoglu, a local Islamic scholar, told us that the Sheikh and the CMB's lack of legitimacy have opened up a religious vacuum (reftels), where Azerbaijanis interested in learning about Islam are looking for alternative religious leaders. Gasimoglu continued that, while all alternative religious

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leaders are not necessarily dangerous as the GOAJ sometimes suggests, some radical Islamic doctrines can fill the void. Farda Asadov said that while GOAJ elements probably understand the dynamic Gasimoglu described, they also probably perceive a risk in undertaking a CMB house-cleaning.

Removing the Sheikh would be an inherent admission by the GOAJ that the CMB structure is illegitimate. Seeking to reform the CMB could also open the door to clerics "outside of the establishment" that the GOAJ would be less capable of controlling.

Comment

¶17. (C) The Sheikh and the CMB have a clear legitimacy problem with the Azerbaijani population. As Gasimoglu noted, there is a real danger that Azerbaijanis -- especially the youth -- seeking to learn more about the Islamic faith will turn to alternative, non-official sources of religious authority, some of which may be radical. In our view, it is a mistake to assume that removing the CMB's monopoly on

Islamic practice will necessarily lead to radicalization, as there currently is very little support within Azerbaijan for radical Islam.

¶18. (C) Weakening the CMB's grip on religious activity in Azerbaijan certainly could open the door to some radical doctrines, but it would also level the playing field for more authentic, credible, indigenous voices to guide Azerbaijan's Muslims. On balance, we believe U.S. policy toward the CMB should mirror our calls for reform, liberalization, and de-monopolization in the political and economic spheres. The Embassy plans to continue to use assistance funds to support programs that challenge this principle of exclusive government control of religious practice. Moreover, it will raise at the highest levels of the government our analysis that the current corrupt religious monopoly breeds what they fear most -- the spread of radicalism. Decreasing the CMB's power would open up the religious playing field, and we think the moderate domestic actors currently are more powerful than the external, radical actors. If the CMB maintains its corrupt, religious monopoly, the influence of external, radical voices could become stronger over the next decade.

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